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Good luxe



By Vanessa Friedman

From earrings made of AK47s to handbags that raise money for school meals – can high-end fashion be used to help the developing world?



Every bag sold from Lauren Bush's Feed range provides school meals

Last Monday, at the Banyan Tree resort in Seoul, South Korea, a gala was held. Guests arrived in gowns and tuxedos, sipped champagne and snacked on canapés, and were then treated to a performance by the Seoul Metropolitan Dance group. Between courses, they bid in a charity auction, oohed at a fashion show and applauded an awards ceremony. So far, so familiar.

Except the event in question was the first-ever World Fashion Grand Prize and Formal Style Gala, conceived and planned by the World Fashion Development Programme, a not-for-profit arm of Fashion 4 Development whose mission is “to create jobs, develop education and contribute to the economic recovery”. And the whole thing opened with a message from Ban-Ki Moon, secretary-general of the United Nations.

Meanwhile, a month before, during Paris Fashion Week, in the gilded halls of the Salons France Ameriques in the eighth arrondissement, the debut show of a new brand called Maiyet was held. The brainchild of entrepreneur Daniel Lubetzky and lawyer Paul van Zyl,

founder of the International Centre for Transitional Justice and previously executive secretary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Maiyet aims to make beautiful products by “forging partnerships with artisans to promote self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship in developing economies”.

And next year, in New York City, yet another dinner and a fashion show are planned: the launch gala for World Fashion Week, the “Olympics” of fashion, aims to showcase work from 40 countries in one place in order to “use the power of fashion for humanitarian causes as a tool for fighting poverty and to promote women empowerment [sic]”.



Fonderie47's Peter Thum uses AK47s to make earrings costing \$150,000



Earrings by Fonderie47, \$150,000

As such, it and the other events above are simply the most glitzy examples of what is a growing trend: one in which activists and individuals from the community of non-government organisations are increasingly harnessing the power of fashion – or to be specific, luxury fashion – to their own ends, both moral and financial.

“There has unquestionably been a proliferation of charitable business models in the high-end fashion space,” says Margot Brandenburg, associate director at the Rockefeller Foundation.

It began most obviously in 2008, when the International Trade Centre, a joint agency of the UN and the World Trade Organisation, launched the Ethical Fashion Programme, which “connects some of the world’s most marginalised people” – artisans in Kenya and Uganda – “to the top of fashion’s value chain” – Vivienne Westwood, Ilaria Venturini Fendi – “for mutual benefit”. Recently, however, the phenomenon has reached critical mass, with the addition of Fonderie 47, a new fine-jewellery brand launched by Peter Thum, who previously founded Ethos Water, and whose end-goal is the destruction of guns in Africa; Feed, an accessory company started by Lauren Bush, where every product sold provides a certain number of school meals; and Toms, the shoe company launched by Blake Mycoskie, where every shoe sold equates to a pair of shoes given away, and which started with canvas espadrilles but has evolved into boots and sparkles – to name but a few of the myriad for-profit ethical fashion initiatives launched in the past few years.



Toms's shoes, £33

There are, of course, significant differences between the approaches. Some adopt a more traditional charitable structure (Toms and Fonderie 47), others focus on building business in underdeveloped regions so they can help themselves (the ITC and Maiyet), and others are geared towards publicising the situation (Fashion 4 Development, WFW). They all exhibit a certain amount of competitive scepticism about each other, but they also share a number of bottom-line characteristics.



Blake Mycoskie of Toms shoes. Every pair sold equates to a pair given away

First, for the most part, their founders do not come from fashion: van Zyl and Lubetzky met at Davos, where they were winners of the Skoll award; Thum met his partner, John Zapolski, at the Technology Entertainment Design conference; Mycoskie was a Silicon Valley entrepreneur; and the chief of the ITC’s Ethical Fashion Programme, Simone Cipriani is, in fact, head of the poor communities and trade programme.

Second, they all cite as formative concerns the UN’s millennium goals, specifically the first (ending poverty and hunger), the third (empowering women) and the eighth (global partnership), and many are also tapping into the political world for support. Fashion 4 Development’s WFDP co-sponsored a lunch entitled First Ladies & Fashion 4 Development last September, in which global figures

such as Michelle Obama and Carla Bruni-Sarkozy lent their names, if not their physical presence, to the cause. And World Fashion Week has been lobbying various central governments (and Hillary Clinton's office) to fund their country's representatives at WFW; just as Argentina's Ministry of Development is managing the country's Fashion Week.

They have also inverted the traditional fashion/charity equation in which fashion chooses a product and cause, and donates a percentage of sales from that product to a specific group. Instead, they started with the moral goal and arrived at a product that could achieve this. Franca Sozzani, the editor of Italian Vogue who recently became a goodwill ambassador for fashion for Fashion 4 Development and who sees her role as connecting producers with distributors, says, "we could just have had an auction and dinner, but why? Who wants another dinner? This is much more sustainable and direct."

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The question is: why has this happened? And does it mark real, systemic change to the definition of "value", or is it simply another trend, with dangerous implications for the communities that get caught up in the fashion world and then dropped when the seasons change?



Italian Vogue editor Franca Sozzani is a goodwill ambassador for Fashion 4 Development

"Fashion – even high-end fashion – is actually one of the most accessible industries," points out Paco De Jaimes, president of WFW, who has launched fashion weeks in Cameroon and Cairo. This is true both functionally and promotionally, "Fashion and the textile industry play a big role in social development," he continues. "If you look at communities that have received micro-financing, the first thing a large percentage of them do is buy a sewing machine and a piece of fabric."

As van Zyl says, "in all the places I worked when I was investigating human rights, I would see artisans with rare skills that were insufficiently utilised and leveraged ... it was becoming clear that luxury was all about artisanship, and finding what was unique and handmade, and there was real opportunity to combine the two, to create sustainable businesses." After all, what is rarer than, say, embroidery produced in a village on the India/Pakistan border with barely any roads? At the same time, however, fashion has become such a part of the pop culture lexicon that, as one woman who has been involved with the ITC says, "it punches way above its weight when it comes to publicity."



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Argentina's Fashion Week is managed by the country's Ministry of Development



Michelle Obama and Carla Bruni-Sarkozy support Fashion 4 Development

For a start-up, this means that if the power of fashion to generate attention can be harnessed to their end, they can seed their ideas with minimum investment in marketing. They have realised, in other words, the same thing Hollywood starlets realised when red carpet pictures started going around the world: get a really great visual and it will go viral in a way that keychains and cookies can never match. It's the same thing Greenpeace realised when it chose baby seals instead of toads for their "Save the Animals" campaigns. A picture is worth a thousand polemics, especially when what you are selling is not just a cause but an expensive piece of jewellery. To this end Maiyet, for example, has supermodel Daria Werbowy posing in its lookbook and notes it "has a lot of friends at CAA", while Fonderie 47 was represented on the Emmy red carpet.

"Fashion is a very mediagenic industry," says De Jaimes. Thum adds, "beautiful things reach people, and beautiful things at a high level reach influential people.

People use things they cherish to say something about themselves and their values." So far, so logical, but perhaps ultimately, not so simple. "The risk," says Rockefeller's Brandenburg, "and it's a pretty big risk when it comes to luxury goods, is that the surplus is so high that between price and assumed cost consumers become suspicious about how much the artisan is actually getting, versus the middleman or brand producer, and the perception becomes one of greenwashing, whether or not it's actually accurate, which can undermine an entire project."



Vivienne Westwood creates handbags using artisans in Africa

“Whenever you start to mix business and social purpose you get a long line of people waiting to criticise you,” acknowledges Thum. “We’re trained to separate these two worlds – both morally and, certainly in the United States, from a tax perspective – and that often leads to the assumption you are only doing this to avoid taxes.”

Working in undeveloped or challenged parts of the world with artisans who may never have seen a drummel (a tool used for handwork), or a designer product is obviously complicated, rife with challenges from the logistic (infrastructure, roads) to the cultural and situational (women working in slums must be home before dark, so overtime is not an option). Often unforeseen problems occur: Maiyet’s van Zyl notes one of his communities in India was hit by malaria, causing a major shortage of workers; another time, all the fabric coming out of Indonesia had a strange green tint, which turned out to be caused by the green soap the community was using. But if a brand pulls out of a project, the impact can be significant.

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In general terms,” says Cipriani, “we are happy there is a strong movement towards a different way to do fashion with both consumers and the industry recognising that fashion must be fair. We respect the fashion system and work within it. What we do not like are projects that create PR but do not commit long-term. This creates scepticism for the sector overall.”

A case in point: Edun, the trade-not-aid fashion brand launched to great ballyhoo in 2005 by Bono and his wife, Ali Hewson. Edun began by announcing it would produce 85 per cent of its collections in Africa, a claim it then had to scale back to less than 30 per cent causing public opprobrium. A 49 per cent stake of Edun was sold to LVMH in 2009, partly in order to profit from the larger group’s manufacturing and distribution infrastructure, and it is now scaling back up, with the aim of producing 40 per cent of its collections in Africa by 2013. In an interview with this newspaper last year, Hewson said LVMH “made an enormous difference in our capabilities”.



Ali Hewson and Bono's Edun sold a 49 per cent stake to LVMH to help with distribution



Ilaria Fendi works in Kenya to create products for her brand Carmina Campus

Still, Brandenburg points out that the problem of companies going bust is not specific to for-profits, or fashion brands – “NGOs go bankrupt all the time because they don’t have a sustainable business model,” she says. Indeed, the WFW gala launch was originally scheduled for last week, but was cancelled when a sponsor (who was funding the accommodation for visiting designers, as well as some production costs) pulled out at the last minute due to “the effects of the international financial crisis”. It is a fact that serves to highlight the problems that arise when markets and missions collide. As van Zyl, who works with Kristy Caylor, former head of Gap’s RED division and now president of Maiyet, notes, “we learnt a lot from the Edun experience.”



Handbag by Ilaria Fendi, €145

“We did six months of due diligence before we selected the artisans we worked with,” he says, noting it chose only businesses that actually were businesses (albeit small ones), and that it also partnered with Nest, a non-profit devoted to promoting the establishment and growth of artisan businesses, to analyse and target the needs in each community, be it training on machinery, computers, in English, or for bottom lines, to ensure both their ability to upscale production capacity if necessary, and understand the global market. They also made Fair Trade payment conditions a tenet of their business model – 50 per cent of an order must be paid for up front (generally in fashion economics the total order is paid for by retailers on the back end, meaning the designer has to front all the production costs on their own) – and 5 per cent of the profits get funnelled back to training through Nest. And Maiyet has not signed exclusivity agreements with any artisans, who are free to work with other brands to increase their own revenue stream.

The difficulty of on-the-ground production in Africa is also acknowledged by Thum. He says Fonderie 47 opted to try to change mindsets as opposed to production centres because “you break one rule at a time”. You first quantify the cost of doing good, add it to the cost of a product, and get people to understand that it is part of what they are paying for – above and beyond the value and style of the product itself. Which is not to denigrate the need to create a really good product.



Maiyet's hand-embroidered long linen dress and a sleeveless blue bubble dress with a hand-carved mosaic

Indeed, van Zyl also points out that the biggest lesson Maiyet has absorbed and one of the biggest points of difference between players in the current movement and those who came before, is “we understand the need to put product first”. He has a creative director – Gabriella Zanzani, former accessories director at Calvin Klein and senior designer at Donna Karan – and though most of the hardware for Maiyet’s handbags is made in Africa, the bags themselves are “made in Italy”.

It’s ironic, but in the process of coming to fashion as a tool for social change, the change agents themselves have taken on board the importance of fashion itself: that in order to make their businesses sustainable, beyond the moral they need a convincing creative proposition attractive enough to sell on its own without the feel-good dressing. It is why the ITC works with designers such as Vivienne

Westwood and Ilaria Fendi, of the Fendi handbag dynasty, whose brand Carmina Campus does significant work with ITC communities in Kenya, and why Thum has enlisted award-winning jeweller Philip Crangi and Roland Iten, a Swiss “mechanical luxury” specialist, to create his pieces. But even then, as Sozzani points out, without a way to get products to a place where they can be seen by consumers there is no point.

Hence part of the impetus behind World Fashion Week, says De Jaimes, was to bring designers who might not otherwise be seen by retailers in New York, Paris, London and Milan to their doorsteps; next year’s participants, who will be selected by a committee from their home country, have to have been in business for at least two years, but there is a limit to the reach of that business if they cannot get their products beyond their own borders. A runway extravaganza is a good marketing tool, but it’s also a trade show, and the latter aspect may be more important than the former.

Ultimately, says Brandenburg, “All these approaches have the potential to add value, but right now the metrics for measuring their success are very structure-specific, so there’s no real way to know what will work best.”

“Ideally, we know that if we do well, [the artisans] do well,” says van Zyl, who wants Maiyet to be a \$100m brand in the next five years. “It’s not a perpendicular relationship, and it’s not a charity.” Certainly not. It’s fashion.

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Extra reporting by Devon Portney

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